

The Value of an Alternative Placement Experience for Primary Initial Teacher Training Students

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Background

This paper is an analysis of the impact on student teachers of a module enabling them to experience an 'alternative' placement to those settings for which they were training. The introduction of an alternative placement in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) is innovative and has implications for ITT, both within the United Kingdom and abroad. Within the last decade there has been considerable research undertaken in the field of learning outside the classroom and the resultant benefits for children (Rickinson 2001, Gould 2003, Dillon et al 2005, Peacock 2006, Malone 2008). There is a case to argue that if there are so many benefits for children to learn outside the classroom, student teachers undertaking Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses should also have this opportunity in order to realise these benefits for children. In addition, there has been government recognition (TDA 2005) that student teachers' experience in settings other than schools can contribute to a student's ability to teach. In light of these developments a module was designed into the Undergraduate Teacher Training programme at Canterbury Christ Church University.

The module was run with Year 2 students on a three year undergraduate Primary School (3-11) initial teacher training degree programme in the United Kingdom. As part of the module the student teachers were able to organise their own 'alternative' placement. The only requirement made by the University was that the placement was to be in a setting where learning takes place other than the two key stages they were training in. The intention was to enable students to have the opportunity to broaden their experience and provide them with the opportunity to explore education in a wider context, in theory and in practice. By opening the range of opportunities, it enabled students to be adventurous in their choice of setting. It was hoped to expand the student's view of the world, particularly those who moved straight from school onto the University programme. From a cohort of 265 Year Two students, 87 elected to undertake their placement within an international context; examples of which included, working in an underprivileged camp for children in Ghana, working in schools in Malaysia and visiting a school for gifted and talented children in Barbados. Other students organised their placements in a range of settings in the United Kingdom, examples of which included, working in museums, libraries, special schools, pre-schools, outdoor adventure centres, heritage sites, zoos and working with healthcare professionals.

Research Questions

The research question was 'What contribution does an alternative placement make to a student training to be a teacher? It was decided that the enquiry would focus on the following four areas:

1. How such a placement can develop a student teacher's knowledge and understanding mapped against the Standards for the Award for Qualified Teacher Status?
2. The impact of the placement on the student teacher's professional identity (personal growth / confidence / challenge / independence)?
3. How such a placement contributed to students' awareness of alternative approaches to teaching and learning in a range of different settings and contexts?
4. To what extent students were able to transfer knowledge and skills into their classroom practice?

Methods

A grounded theory approach was taken to explore the foci of the enquiry. There were a range of data collection methods used including; general whole cohort evaluation to gain information about personal and professional development (questionnaire), evaluations against the standards for Qualified Teacher Status to gain information on frequency and professional development (survey); three case studies to gain depth of response (case studies) and proposed interviews of students on placement to establish a sample of impact (interview). The data collected is qualitative and quantitative in an attempt to establish as complete a picture as possible of impact.

Frame

In the light of the identified areas of enquiry, four areas of literature were selected for review:

1. The standards required for the award of Qualified Teacher Status and literature associated with their achievements (e.g. Gould 2003, Grainger et al 2004, O'Donnell 2006, Roberts 2006, TDA 2008).
2. Professional identity (e.g. Barnes et al 2007, Osterman et al (2004), Scoffham et al 2009).
3. Alternative approaches to teaching (e.g. Austin 2007, Grainger 2004, Malone 2008)
4. Transferability of experience into classroom practice (e.g. TDA 2008, Macaulay & Cree 1999, Osterman. & Kottkamp,(2004) Philpott 2006).

Data will be mapped against selected criteria to identify frequency. Analysis of the emerging patterns will be considered in the context of the theoretical frame.

Research findings

Possible outcomes:

Once the findings have been analyzed, it is anticipated there will be several outcomes; a degree of personal and professional development will have occurred through students experiencing the alternative placement and students will have an increased confidence in facing the unknown. It is possible that this has transferred to their school experience. There should be evidence of a greater understanding and appreciation of alternative approaches to teaching and learning which can be transferred into the settings for which they are training. For those who worked with children in educational contexts outside the classroom, it is anticipated that they will have an increased confidence in planning educational trips and an awareness of the benefits of learning outside the classroom. It is also possible that the experience of working in other culture and language settings will increase students' empathy with children who find themselves in similar circumstances in English classrooms.

It is recognized that some settings did not offer such rich opportunities and this can be used in offering advice to students about future placements.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to the understanding of the role that an alternative placement can have in an Initial Teacher Training programme and will inform other teacher trainers of the value of undertaking this type of module.